

**Senate Select Committee on School Safety Hearing on
“Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Discrimination and School Safety”
Plummer Park- Fiesta Hall, West Hollywood
October 3, 2002**

**Testimony of Barbara Delbon,
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**K.L.E.A.R.
KIDS LEARNING EMPATHY AND RESPECT
San Mateo Union High School District
Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center**

As an Assistant Principal for fifteen years, I was responsible for the discipline of about 1,000 tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students. Because of these experiences, I know that the window of time between disrespectful language and violence is small and shrinking. I also know that students are tormented by harassment that often goes undetected below the radar of teachers and other adults on campus.

Given these facts and that disrespectful even hateful language is frequently heard in the halls and on the grounds of high schools, there is a definite need to implement a program that teaches respect and empathy for all. KLEAR is such a program.

Called together by Superior Court Judge Marta Diaz, two dozen community leaders from the court, county agencies, schools, police departments, non-profit community service agencies and religious institutions created a program to address the issues behind disrespectful speech used by our youth.

Clearly, suspending a student for harassment, hurtful language, or other emotional violence does not challenge the student's beliefs and value system nor does it necessarily enhance understanding of the impact on the target of disrespectful behavior.

Developed as an alternative to suspension, the KLEAR Program began a pilot phase for school years 2001-02 and 2002-03, with the seven high schools in the San Mateo Union High School District. The district has adopted a Code of Conduct that outlines acceptable behavior and a need for empathy and respect for all students:

The San Mateo Union High School District is deeply committed to the belief that, on high school campuses, full participation in the educational process must be in an environment which is free from harassment. Comments about an individual or group which are degrading or derogatory, based upon race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, immigrant status, homelessness, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, age, medical condition, physical appearance, or physical or mental disability will not be tolerated. Failure to comply with this expectation will result in disciplinary action.

Depending on individual circumstances when an act or speech violates this policy, a student may be referred to KLEAR as an alternative to suspension, as an addition to suspension, or as a voluntary/prevention measure.

KLEAR is an educational program for student offenders and their families. Students who are referred to KLEAR take part in three interactive sessions as well as a fourth restorative mediation. The participation of parent(s) or guardian(s) with the student is required in the first three sessions. Each session includes individual and group exercises, presentations, discussions, homework, and opportunities for skill development. The goal of the program is to help the young person to have a better understanding of the harmful impact of his/her behavior and to encourage the development of empathy and respect for others.

The three successive Monday night sessions begin promptly at 7:00 P.M. and end at 9:30 P.M.

In addition to the three interactive sessions, there is a fourth session which is a restorative mediation process, facilitated by two mediators, for the two individuals who were in conflict. This is a very positive “healing” process which can be helpful in normalizing relations at school, thereby lowering tension for both the target and the student who was referred to KLEAR.

The Mediation Coordinator often partners with a high school student who has advanced training in victim/offender mediation. Parents may attend the mediation but may not take part in the process.

This past summer we took components of the KLEAR Program to the court schools at Hillcrest Juvenile Detention Center and Gateway, a school for students on probation.

Whether at the comprehensive high schools, the continuation program, or the court schools, when asked what disrespectful words do you hear most often at school, students reply without exception, “gay and fag/faggot.” Many other words are added to the list, but the list always begins with these two words.

Consequently, for all participants, the KLEAR Program devotes attention to curriculum which includes film excerpts and dialogue to examine this issue. Our work in this area has resulted in transformative experiences for young people. Moreover, we offer students the opportunity to determine ways in which one can be an ally for a student who might be targeted for disrespect.

During the year that preceded the launching of KLEAR, students from the seven high schools joined to create a “mutual trust and respect” assembly that was presented at each of the seven high schools. Students shared their own personal experiences in dealing with hurtful language. One student activist spoke eloquently about the fact that she felt diminished as a human being each time she heard the word “gay” used casually as an expression or joke.

Another component of the assembly was a student written skit which portrayed a young athlete and his struggles as a gay youth. His despair and sense of hopelessness ultimately led to his suicide. After the skit, student leaders read the alarming statistics related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth.

Students are encouraged to provide leadership in maintaining a respectful school culture through peer helping programs, conflict mediation programs, student government, Service Commissions, “Days of Respect Programs,” and gay/straight alliance clubs.

In spite of these efforts, there are still students who choose not to abide by the Code of Conduct. For those students, we offer KLEAR with our goal of changing hearts and minds!